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Teaching Political Science in Asia

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When we think about teaching political science in the English language to an Asian student body in an Asian society, the challenges we face go beyond the usual debate in English speaking academic circles over what constitutes political science and how best to teach it. Students' level of English proficiency is often cited as a barrier against effective teaching. Indeed, it is one of the most obvious challenges. My own experience in studying political science first in China and then in the United States teaching for the last three years both undergraduate and graduate courses in the United States, Macao, and Japan, tells me that a student's low English language proficiency is not as formidable a factor as it is often said to be. By putting students in the center of course design and teaching/classroom management activities, political science teaching can help students both learn content and enhance their English language proficiency.

Political Science as a Body of Knowledge

There can be no dispute that Political Science as a body of knowledge is a product of advances in Western civilization. Along with the history of British imperialism and post-WWII America's political and economic influences worldwide, Political Science presented in the English language has solidly assumed intellectual dominance and professional prestige. Meanwhile, political science concepts, themes, methodology and methods, theories, scopes of inquiry, and the end purpose of political science research and teaching have been constantly shaping and reshaping themselves.

This dynamic nature of political science as a body of knowledge makes it difficult, if not meaningless, to make assertions about what "good" political science is. In other words, it would be a fallacy to claim that there exists "the" political science to teach to Asian students, regardless of the teacher's academic background in the British/European or American tradition of Political Science.¹

The pedagogical implication of the nature and developments of Political Science is that teaching political science is in and of itself an exploratory process. While it is common sense that the Political Science teacher has to be exploratory to be effective even when the medium of instruction is English, what tools can be employed to better explore the additional territories in an Asian setting?

Student-Centered Course Design

At the college level, a student has completed the stage of civic education. As is true on college campuses in Western countries, college students in Asia are in school to acquire advanced knowledge. While it is debatable whether there is a set of "Asian Values"² to speak of, students in Asia—East Asia in particular—do seem to subscribe to the Confucian notions of hierarchy more readily than their Western peers. Of more direct relevance to our discussion of course design is the classical Confucian emphasis on respect for established authority and opposition to a revolutionary approach to change. Knowledge that is presented in the shape of a teacher's choice of textbook(s) is naturally regarded as an authoritative one. Among other dimensions, classical Confucianism places cultivation of the self/mind and group/societal harmony before pursuit of individual interests/needs and competition/debate, however rhetorical the latter may be in a Western society. Implicit in talking about such an educational/societal background ought to be an awareness that the political science (indeed, social sciences) teacher operating on an Asian campus ought not to assume that, for example, students will tell their instructor how they feel about a course syllabus.

More specifically, most students are unlikely to verbalize their reactions to such questions as "Why did you choose to take this course?" "What do you want to learn?" Their upbringing instilled in them the necessity to respect authority and age and other elements that make up the status quo, and to save face for the other side in social interactions, among other

norms of public behavior. It prevents them from showing their reactions in ways customary to Westerners. This should not be taken to imply that Asian students are inscrutable. The task for a political science teacher is to bear in mind that Confucian principles of reciprocity demand that the teacher design the curriculum in such a way that it would not be too far beyond the students' reach. Therefore, knowing the students—their pre-college educational experience, their expected roles in society post-college, and their preferred classroom behaviors, etc.—must take place before designing a course syllabus.

A second factor to bear in mind is the salient nationalism that is often less articulated in Asia than in such self-confident Western societies as America or Great Britain. By nationalism I am not referring to the politics of government-to-government diplomacy or citizenry movements of various types and natures. Instead, I am referring to the pride in identifying with one's own nation-state, its governing system and diplomacy.³ The history of civilizational encounters between East and West is such that half a century after the formal end of Western colonization of Asia, even with unprecedented records of economic growth, social stability, and scientific achievements, as citizens of Asian nation-states students share with their governments the agony of searching for "proper" ways to interact with the West, its individuals and ideas. It is easy to point out the two extremes of naiveté and outright rejection. But the more challenging task lies in figuring out exactly how an Asian student on an Asian campus would react to particular issues (historical or current) that are integral parts of any political science (social sciences) teaching. Recognizing the presence of a quiet yet powerful nationalism also carries implications for conducting classroom activities, a topic I shall touch on later in this paper.

Still a third factor is the fact that Asian students cannot and should not be expected to make meaning of many of the usual references to historical events and figures that are indeed common sense in the minds of the average Western college student. This is in large part due to Asian governments' selective inclusion of Western civilizational history in the Asian curricula for compulsory education. Generally speaking, Asian governments play a more assertive role in shaping up contents for their respective civic education programs. To use Japan as an example, the presence of its national government's Ministry of Education is felt in more aspects of school education than is the case in most Western democracies.⁴ It suffices to mention that Japan is one of the most successful and stable democracies throughout Asia. It is easy to compare such a state of affairs with that in the West and conclude that government censorship is a way of life in Asia. However, Asia's comparatively shorter experience in nation-building ought to make it easier to understand why. A sense of nationhood is valued throughout the world, East and West. A major difference is that in the West most governments solidified the same task in a much earlier time and continue to do so (through more subtle means) than governments in the East do. My point here is that it is unfair to complain that Asian college students "don't know the basics." They know their basics—it is only that their basics are not readily known to international teachers, particularly those who have just started a career in Asia.

What implications can be drawn from the preceding discussions? First, the course syllabus has to be different from that created for use on a Western campus. This does not necessarily mean simplification. For, the student body is drastically different. The syllabus must sufficiently address the question "What may my students want to learn" rather than "Are my students ready for this?" Second, a syllabus is more effective when it is theme-based. Selection of themes should combine two features. One, choose the themes that provide foundation for understanding political science in the English language. Two, choose those themes that can help students make connections with political phenomena more familiar to them. In this way, concepts can be more easily conveyed. Three, introduction of disciplinary themes has to be accompanied by explanation of why such themes are of significance to the Western academia. Concurrently, these themes should also help students synthesize political events in their own society and make a meaningful comparison of their own society and with one in the West. In short, a political science teacher is, at the same time, a teacher of Western intellectual and political/social history.

Classroom Management

Managing the dynamics of a classroom is by nature an individual endeavor. In the space below, I shall comment on a few complaints made by some native speakers of English who happen to be my colleagues teaching disciplinary and language courses in Asia. Such complaints, I believe, are counter-productive in teaching Asian students both basic facts or independent thinking.

The students don't know a thing about their own country. This complaint is itself a display of ignorance on the part of the teacher. Students do know about their own country. How well they know their own country is a matter best left to indigenous means of judgement. It is only that they cannot yet articulate their knowledge at the level of English language fluency that can be easily understood by the native English speaker. Worse still, operating on such a belief compels the teacher to start "enlightening" students in ways that may turn out to be offensive to students. In Asia, students' negative feelings about a teacher's comments are not always expressed in words. The need to save the teacher's face is probably of a higher priority to an Asian student than "to get the facts right." But when students come to a conclusion (correctly or wrongly) that their knowledge about themselves is not treated with due respect and appreciation, classroom atmosphere can be easily damaged, if not permanently, for the unfortunate teacher.

Here I recall a conversation I had with ethnic Chinese students at the University of Macao about their assessment of a foreign language teacher who had been teaching in the territory for over ten years. That teacher kept saying that he loved the Chinese culture and often talked about it in his language classes; but he truly understood very little and was unwilling to learn more. So went students' complaint to me. It was hard for me to judge which side I had to be sympathetic with. Indeed, it was perhaps unnecessary to make that judgment at all. Student-teacher interactions in the classroom are just one of the many facets of social interactions. Once goodwill on either side is gone, there is little recourse. Of course, a teacher can and should make students re-think their established beliefs/notions about any subject matter under the sun. In the case of the foreign language teacher referred to above, a display of sensitivity by inviting his students to comment on his knowledge about Chinese culture and China the nation-state would certainly have helped. It would also have helped improve his students' language proficiency by providing them with an opportunity to talk about themselves in the target language they were learning to master.

Students in Asia cannot handle topics that are known to be fundamental issues in a comparable Western curriculum. This complaint puts the teacher at the risk of committing a fatal error: teaching is to satisfy the teacher, not the students. Granted, anybody in the teaching profession cannot avoid making subjective assumptions about what a group of students already know and ought to know. Once again, just because a student is not capable of articulating his/her knowledge and ideas in a foreign language, one should in no way automatically infer that the student is ill-prepared for learning new facts and conceptualizing them. The fact of the matter is that a teacher has a lot to learn from his/her students. Learning from students can also allow the teacher to make abstract ideas more easily understood by the students.

To use one episode in my own teaching experience as an example, learning from my students has made it easier for me to teach one important item on my agenda: definition of political science. Almost universally, political science is defined to be a study of policy choices a government makes. In terms of language, it is a short sentence that speaks volumes. In one of my classes at Miyazaki International College, students were assigned to situate themselves in a number of roles. The issue under discussion was the Japanese government's new regulation on dumping sites for industrial waste (a real case). Between the role-playing pair of a company employee and his president, two students had this conversation:

Query: "Please consider not dumping in my neighborhood; otherwise my family has to find a new place to live."

Reply: "You cannot oppose: otherwise you are fired."

A third voice representing the government bureaucrat asked the company president to be considerate of the government's need to abide by international conventions.

After hearing such a conversation it was a lot easier for me to point out the obvious to my students: often a government's choice of policy is one no one wants, but alternative choices are not readily available. The study of political science, then, is to know the origin(s), evolution, and future possibilities of policy making. In addition, it opened up an opportunity for me to introduce the factors to consider in debating a public policy in the United States.⁵

The learning process has to be fun. At the risk of over-generalization, a foreign language teacher tends to take this notion to heart more often than teachers of other subjects do. The global trend against traditional grammar-translation approach to language instruction/learning offers part of the explanation. Furthermore, fun and games are indeed helpful in generating student participation in classroom activities, particularly when the student population is in the late teens and the level of language proficiency is low. Care, though, has to be taken to ensure that game activities help students comprehend what is being taught. In other words, each game must be designed to sufficiently address the fundamental question on the mind of a student: "Why should I spend time being a part of this game?"⁶

Space does not allow a lengthier discussion of the many other aspects of classroom management. I hold the view that once a teacher takes the approach of accepting students as they are and climbing the intellectual ladder hand in hand with them, linguistic barriers are a lot easier to overcome. Communication in a classroom is by nature more verbal than that in other social settings. A teacher's inability to operate in the students' native tongue and students' inability to match the teacher's level of discourse can be a source of frustration on both sides. But the level of verbal communication can be increased when ideas are driven home to students by reaching to their level of English first. The political science teacher, then, has to be constantly aware of his or her dual role of working with students to lay their foundations, block by block, for linguistic abstraction that is the norm in political science (indeed, social sciences) discourse.

Integrating Content and Language Instruction

Teaching in Miyazaki International College (MIC) can be viewed as an exemplification of the challenges that come with teaching political science in Japan, if not throughout Asia. MIC's team-teaching arrangement, i.e., a content instructor paired with an English as a Foreign/Second Language (ESL/EFL) instructor, for lower division courses can lead to conflicts over what constitutes good pedagogy between the two. It may happen that team-teaching becomes in fact language teaching.

While there is no doubt that language teaching definitely benefits students, I often wonder if language teaching can be meaningfully separated from content in the first place. Language, be it English, Japanese, or any other, is the medium through which ideas are communicated. EFL/ESL language teachers operating in an English-speaking society help immigrant/refugee students acquire literacy and foreign students wishing to pursue degree studies with their native-speaker peers to catch up in their language skills. The importance of the English-speaking society those students are in cannot be overstated, whereas in Japan and other parts of Asia, the language teacher cannot expect students to do more than to speak English in the classroom only.

Since the English language is loaded with values and references associated with English speaking societies, a language instructor has to make adjustments as to the contents of language instruction.⁷ In this regard, words like simplification or dilution are inappropriate to describe the approach. For centuries speakers of different languages have been able to communicate through translation. This obvious historical fact tells us that teaching English should go beyond the level of vocabulary and grammar. At the heart of language teaching is the organization and presentation of ideas. Only on that basis can grammar and rhetorical skills be meaningfully taught.⁸

MIC as an experimental college of liberal arts envisions that through four years of education students master a body of knowledge comparable to what is taught in a North American liberal arts college. This mission underscores the importance of language education in the curriculum. A key question is whether or not students can acquire the necessary English language skills to articulate what they have learned. As is true of an adult's experience in second language acquisition, fluency comes after knowing what to say.

Therefore, a language instructor and a content instructor ought to complement each other to help students learn ideas that are at first foreign to them. In other words, both the content and language teachers' shared task ought to be to help students become literate in the disciplinary discourse. Their professional boundaries in an institution like MIC, in turn, become less clearly marked.

Final Thoughts

A common phenomenon in international education is that both the teacher and the student knowingly or unknowingly assume the role of a cultural ambassador. As such, both the teacher and the student must learn to operate on the principle that cultures become stronger through unthreatening means of interactions. In this sense, both the teacher and the student are going through the same learning experience. This statement is not to imply that a teacher should abandon his/her cultural identity, nor should a student be made to. My point is that teaching political science in Asia becomes possible once the student becomes convinced that he/she has to take a course seriously, not because there are credits to earn, but because it can truly contribute to his/her intellectual growth. When that happens, there is real teaching and learning going on. Otherwise, an international teacher risks conducting nothing more than one-sided instruction.

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Notes

¹Differences between British/European and American traditions of political science research themselves make up a topic for lively debate. For a recent summary, see Gerry Stoker, "Introduction", David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, eds., *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 3-20.

²Debates on "Asian values" have generated volumes of academic literature. See Samuel Huntington, et al., *The Clash of Civilizations: the Debate* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., 1993). Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Concept of the Orient* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) offers the single best reading to date that examines the roots of stereotyping of Asia in the West.

³For a discussion of the various tenets of "nationalism" in contemporary Japan, see Bruce Stronach, *Beyond the Rising Sun: Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1995).

⁴See, for example, William K. Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁵I've benefited from reading Carolyn Kessler's *Cooperative Language Learning: a Teacher's Resource Book* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1992) in designing the class activity reported above.

⁶Again, Kessler's and many other works are a valuable resource for designing classroom activities.

⁷On the interrelationship between evolution of the English language and European, American, and world histories, see Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 3rd edition (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1978).

⁸Illuminating in this regard is Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 1990). In particular, Part III "Literature, Culture, Politics," pp. 225-338."